

**Brass Tacks**  
**By Katrina J. Zeno**

**Tango and the Theology of the Body**

I love to tango. As a single Catholic woman, this isn't always easy. Argentine tango can be danced close—very close. Its intimacy and passion can sweep me into the romantic ozone layer, obscuring any sense of reality. It lures me into wanting more—more intimacy, more connectedness, more transcendence.

So why do I tango? Because Argentine tango conceals many profound spiritual lessons. Our relationship with God is meant to be one of intimacy and passion. So it is with tango. In the spiritual life, God leads and we follow. So it is in tango. In the Eucharist, God gives Himself away to us. The same should be true in tango. Argentine tango takes the abstract concepts of our faith and makes them concrete. Let me explain.

In most partner dances, the tempo of the music remains the same and the number of steps is limited. Not in tango. In the same song, the music might change from melodious violins to the up-tempo bandoleon (similar to an accordion). The possibilities for new steps are endless because the structure of the dance can be combined in an infinite number of ways. Thus, I must always be poised, ready to follow.

For years, I begged God to send me a nice, Catholic tango partner. When this didn't happen, I finally realized the virtue of dancing with different men—it forced me to become! a good follower.

To the observer, following looks like a passive activity. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a follower, I must be ready to go in any direction at any time. My partner might ask me to pivot, step across myself and execute ochos (figure eights), or pause while he crafts figures on the floor by himself like an ice-skater. While the possibilities are endless, the dynamic is always the same: The man invites, the woman responds, and the man receives the woman's response.

This is exactly how God relates to us. He never forces us to do anything. He constantly invites us to take the next step in Him. The problem is that most of us have very little experience following. We don't know how to wait. We don't know how to be sensitive to His lead. We don't know how to remain in the present rather than yearning for the past or racing to the future. Tango teaches all these skills on a very concrete level, skills that transfer wonderfully into our relationship with Christ.

There's another reason tango has been good for my Catholic faith, and it has to do with Pope John Paul II's theology of the body. The pope's fundamental premise is that the body reveals God. When we look at male and female, the very structure of the body tells us that it's made for union. Male and male aren't made for nuptial union. Female and female aren't made for nuptial union. Only male and female are made for nuptial union.

This union, however, isn't self-centered and individualistic. It's meant to be a union and communion of self-giving love. In spousal love, the two are no longer two but one. From the beginning, God designed married love this way!: "This is why a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife and the two shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

In the new covenant, Jesus elevates marriage to a sacramental sign. Marriage no longer simply represents the natural union of man and woman but makes visible Christ's total and irrevocable gift of Himself to the Church. Just as He gave Himself away to the Church so that He could be one with her (cf. Ephesians 5:31-32), so husband and wife are called to give themselves away so as to image the oneness of Christ and the Church. This self-gift doesn't happen in some ultraspiritual realm but in the body. Christ said, "This is my body, given up for you." So, too, man and woman say to each other, "This is my body, given up for you."

How could this possibly apply to tango?! Danced in all its beauty and artistry, Argentine tango expresses the theology of the body: The man gives himself away to the woman, the woman gives herself away to the man, and suddenly the two are no longer dancing as two but as one. Right before our eyes we see union and communion, two and one, giving and receiving. The man and woman are a visible sign of the self-giving union between Christ and the Church.

Despite the many times I've been tempted to throw in the tango towel, this is why I continue: Tango is not just a dance, it's sacramental. It constantly propels me toward my heavenly calling—union and communion with Christ through a total gift of self.

Katrina J. Zeno is a national conference and retreat speaker. This article was drawn from one of her talks, "Three to Tango." .

**Tango: A Sacramental?**

Katrina Zeno's well-intentioned article, "Tango and the Theology of the Body" (November 2001), calls for a word of caution.

She writes: "Our relationship with God is meant to be one of intimacy and passion." This can easily be misunderstood, for it should primarily be grounded in an attitude of trembling reverence and loving adoration. Intimacy is the reward given to those who have trodden "the narrow path," carried their cross, and achieved a high degree of purification. He alone who has reached such spiritual heights can call Christ "Bridegroom." Most of us are only deigned to be His servants.

Indeed, there is "intimacy" in tango ("close, very close"), but this is precisely what the Curé d'Ars warns against: In many of his homilies, he literally thundered against dances (tango had not yet been invented). Spending much of his life in the confessional, he knows how morally dangerous this intimacy between unmarried persons of two different sexes can be. Is it legitimate to be "close, very close" to someone who is not one's husband? Is it not inevitable that it can lead to an unhealthy giddiness as Ms. Zeno herself admits? Can it not easily degenerate into a substitute for the marital embrace blessed by God?

I am far from certain that Ms. Zeno's interpretation of the Holy Father's theology would meet with his approval. Spiritual life is fraught with dangers and is the most fertile of all soils to nurture illusions. What we all need is the virtue of "holy sobriety," so profoundly analyzed by my husband, Dietrich von Hildebrand, in *Transformation in Christ*. How tempting to draw parallels between the "passion" that tango triggers in us and the holy ardor burning in the hearts of the saints. How tempting it is for all of us to put holy labels on actions which—to quote Nietzsche—are "human, all too human."

Humility is the key to spiritual progress—a constant realization of how easily we nurture illusions and cheat ourselves into believing that something we enjoy is actually a way to Christ. As for her claim that "tango is not only a dance, it is a [sic] sacramental," the answer is a resounding no.

**Alice von Hildebrand**  
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**The author replies:**

I am most grateful to Dr. von Hildebrand for her response to my article on tango and the theology of the body. Her keen mind wonderfully pinpointed areas that could indeed be misunderstood, and it would grieve me if those were interpreted contrary to my intention.

I would never want to imply that our approach to God should leave out "trembling reverence" and "loving adoration." At the same time, I believe God is pouring out the grace of spousal love on laity in a way that previously had only been the domain of religious. I call Christ my Bridegroom not at my initiative but at His. I would never have been so bold as to think I could enter into a relationship with God characterized by passion and intimacy, and yet He has offered this privilege to me and I have responded. Tango, as I tried to explain, has become an artistic metaphor for this grace.

I agree with Dr. von Hildebrand's caution regarding intimacy shared between persons of the opposite sex, and yet I do not believe such intimacy inevitably leads to giddiness and a substitute for the marital embrace. My hope, and the point of my article, is that the experience of tango (or drama, music, art, etc.) should not be confined to the human dimension but lead us to the spiritual dimension. This is God's design for all creation—to be a visible sign of an invisible reality.

It is tragic that our culture has lost a sense of the sacramental value of creation, human relationships, the arts, the body, and even work. Life is meant to be an ongoing encounter with the invisible through the visible, not only at church but while washing dishes, riding the subway, and playing with our grandchildren. I am grateful that tango awakened in me this sense of the sacramentality of life and of the ability of the arts to convey this sacramentality.

Of course any art form can be bastardized into a fleeting substitution for the authentic good, but so can work, basketball, fast cars, political systems, and the esteem of others. The call of the laity is not to remove ourselves from society and culture but to transform it from within, to take human actions and imbue them again with the spirit of the gospel.

I pray that those who meet me experience just this—someone who is passionately in love with God and who attempts to live in her body and actions the sacramentality of creation, including the sacramentality of tango.

**Katrina Zeno**

## On the life of St. John Vianney

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/mary/cure.htm>

Even more strenuous, if possible, were his efforts in bringing about a suppression of dancing—an amusement to which the people were passionately addicted but which the Saint knew only too well to be a very hotbed of sin. Here he met with the most obstinate resistance, and his victory was very slow in coming. At times he himself paid the fiddler engaged for a dance as much as, or more than, the fee he would have earned by his playing, on condition that he stayed away. As a counter-attraction he revived Sunday Vespers. In his struggle against dancing, his zeal carried him to surprising lengths. In 1895 an old woman told Mgr. Convert, another parish priest of Ars, that from the age of sixteen to twenty-two she did not make her Easter Communion because the Saint refused her absolution. The reason was that once a year when visiting her relatives in a neighbouring village, on the occasion of the fete of the place, she used to dance for a little while on the village green. The woman added that she went to confession on the eve of all the great feasts but the Saint never absolved her. She only received absolution when, after a resistance of six years, she at last made up her mind to forgo this annual fling.

The Saint was determined to suppress dancing as far as his authority and jurisdiction reached. His master stroke in this long-drawn campaign was to persuade the young women to stay away from these entertainments. Instead of the dance they attended some sodality meeting. The Cure's success led to an explosion of rage on the part of his enemies: such a man was bound to make enemies! Their fury vented itself in the vilest calumnies and the grossest libels against this angel in the flesh, and no persecution was deemed too petty or too coarse where he was concerned. That he was keenly sensitive—to it all we gather from a remark he let fall towards the end of his life—had he known all he was to suffer at Ars, he said, he would have died on the day of his arrival. Yet such was his humility that he was perfectly sincere when he expected to be suspended by his bishop and even to be thrown into gaol: "But," he said, "I do not deserve such a grace." To these external vexations was added the far more searching trial of dryness in prayer, and at times the lowering clouds of despair cast their dark shadow upon the naturally sunny fields of his spirit.

<http://www.ignatius.com/magazines/hprweb/cihak.htm>

After addressing excessive work and tavern life, Vianney began a campaign against dancing. Why dancing? Is Vianney simply revealing himself as prudish? Here again it is important to view his efforts through the lens of his time. He saw dancing as a symptom of a root problem. He saw that one enamored with dancing was unable to relish pure and simple pleasures, and dulled one's sense for spiritual realities. Immersion in video games, Internet and television in our times render the human spirit dull before the real and simple pleasures of human life. The issue, moreover, was not simply dancing, but the "party scene" that accompanied it. The dances in Ars were occasions for serious sin against chastity in which people used each other for pleasure, not love. Perhaps events like MTV's Spring Break, contraception or cohabitation may be dancing's correlative in our day. "There is not a commandment of God," he preached, "which dancing does not cause men to break" (p. 146). He took action as well. One day he met the fiddler as he was arriving at Ars to play for a dance. The Curé of Ars asked him what he was usually paid. Vianney gave him double so that the man went away satisfied, and the dance did not occur. Like his efforts against excessive work and tavern life, ending the dances took time and patience—25 years.

## Introduction to the Devout Life – St. Francis de Sales

### CHAPTER XXXIII. Of Balls, and other Lawful but Dangerous Amusements.

DANCES and balls are things in themselves indifferent, but the circumstances ordinarily surrounding them have so generally an evil tendency, that they become full of temptation and danger. The time of night at which they take place is in itself conducive to harm, both as the season when people's nerves are most excited and open to evil impressions; and because, after being up the greater part of the night, they spend the mornings afterwards in sleep, and lose the best part of the day for God's Service. It is a senseless thing to turn day into night, light into darkness, and to exchange good works for mere trifling follies. Moreover, those who frequent balls almost inevitably foster their Vanity, and vanity is very conducive to unholy desires and dangerous attachments.

I am inclined to say about balls what doctors say of certain articles of food, such as mushrooms and the like—the best are not good for much; but if eat them you must, at least mind that they are properly cooked. So, if circumstances over which you have no control take you into such places, be watchful how you prepare to enter them. Let the dish be seasoned with moderation, dignity and good intentions. The doctors say (still referring to the mushrooms), eat sparingly of them, and that but seldom, for, however well dressed, an excess is harmful. So dance but little, and that rarely, my daughter, lest you run the risk of growing over fond of the amusement.

Pliny says that mushrooms, from their porous, spongy nature, easily imbibe meretricious matter, so that if they are near a serpent, they are infected by its poison. So balls and similar gatherings are wont to attract all that is bad and vicious; all the quarrels, envyings, slanders, and indiscreet tendencies of a place will be found collected in the ballroom. While people's bodily pores are opened by the exercise of dancing, the heart's pores will be also opened by excitement, and if any serpent be at hand to whisper foolish words of levity or impurity, to

insinuate unworthy thoughts and desires, the ears which listen are more than prepared to receive the contagion.

Believe me, my daughter, these frivolous amusements are for the most part dangerous; they dissipate the spirit of devotion, enervate the mind, check true charity, and arouse a multitude of evil inclinations in the soul, and therefore I would have you very reticent in their use.

To return to the medical simile, it is said that after eating mushrooms you should drink some good wine. So after frequenting balls you should frame pious thoughts which may counteract the dangerous impressions made by such empty pleasures on your heart. Bethink you, then. That while you were dancing, souls were groaning in hell by reason of sins committed when similarly occupied, or in consequence thereof.

2. Remember how, at the selfsame time, many religious and other devout persons were kneeling before God, praying or praising Him. Was not their time better spent than yours?

3. Again, while you were dancing, many a soul has passed away amid sharp sufferings; thousands and tens of thousands were lying all the while on beds of anguish, some perhaps untended, unconsolated, in fevers, and all manner of painful diseases. Will you not rouse yourself to a sense of pity for them? At all events, remember that a day will come when you in your turn will lie on your bed of sickness, while others dance and make merry.

4. Bethink you that our Dear Lord, Our Lady, all the Angels and Saints, saw all that was passing. Did they not look on with sorrowful pity, while your heart, capable of better things, was engrossed with such mere follies?

5. And while you were dancing time passed by, and death drew nearer. Trifle as you may, the awful dance of death [154] must come, the real pastime of men, since therein they must, whether they will or no, pass from time to an eternity of good or evil. If you think of the matter quietly, and as in God's Sight, He will suggest many a like thought, which will steady and strengthen your heart.

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[154] S. Francis de Sales doubtless had in his thoughts the then common pictorial representations of the Dance of Death, with which (although to our own modern ideas there would be almost irreverence if reproduced) we are familiar through Holbein's celebrated Dance, and others. The old covered bridge at Lucerne is one of the most striking illustrations.

### CHAPTER XXXIV. When to use such Amusements rightly.

IF you would dance or play rightly, it must be done as a recreation, not as a pursuit, for a brief space of time, not so as make you unfit for other things, and even then but seldom. If it is a constant habit, recreation turns into occupation. You will ask when it is right to dance or play? The occasions on which it is right to play at questionable games are rare; ordinary games and dances may be indulged in more frequently. But let your rule be to do so chiefly when courteous consideration for others among whom you are thrown requires it, subject to prudence and discretion; for consideration towards others often sanctions things indifferent or dangerous, and turns them to good, taking away what is evil. Thus certain games of chance, bad in themselves, cease to be so to you, if you join in them merely out of a due courtesy. I have been much comforted by reading in the Life of S. Carlo Borromeo, how he joined in certain things to please the Swiss, concerning which ordinarily he was very strict; as also how S. Ignatius Loyola, when asked to play, did so. As to S. Elizabeth of Hungary, she both played and danced occasionally, when in society, without thereby hindering her devotion, which was so firmly rooted that, like the rocks of a mountain lake, it stood unmoved amid the waves and storms of pomp and vanity which it encountered.

Great fires are fanned by the wind, but a little one is soon extinguished if left without shelter.

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